

The thirteenth meeting of the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC) for the academic year 2022–2023 was called to order by Professor Call, chair of the committee, in the president’s office on Monday, February 27, at 4:00 p.m. Present, in addition to Professor Call, were Professors Hasan, Martini, Mattiacci, and Polk; President Elliott; Provost and Dean of the Faculty Epstein; and Associate Provost Tobin, recorder.

Professor Call began the meeting by asking the members if they wished to respond at this time to a [letter that Professor Umphrey had sent to the committee](#). In that correspondence, she noted the recommendation of last year’s Committee of Six, on which she had served, that the FEC share reflections each year on how the new governance structure was working. The purpose would be to inform the evaluation of the new structure at the conclusion of its three-year pilot, and to make any necessary adjustments along the way. Professor Mattiacci expressed the view that the most salient issues on which to reflect is the composition of the FEC (with some of its members being untenured) and the committee’s charge, which now no longer includes issues of tenure and promotion. In addition to offering the members’ own evaluation, Professor Mattiacci added, it would be interesting to find ways to learn more about the faculty’s view of whether the new structure is resulting in the committee being more accessible, proactive, and productive than it was under the former structure.

When asked about her perspective on this question, Provost Epstein said that she sees the FEC as a work in progress. Holding weekly meetings, rather than having them every other week, has been a change for the better, the provost said, and she feels that the committee has been finding its footing under this schedule this spring. In her view, the committee structure would benefit from the addition of one more tenured colleague. The members agreed that the committee has had a slow start; in retrospect, Professor Martini suggested that the committee could have been more proactive over the summer—for example, in thinking about the upcoming year’s agenda items and making requests for data. The members agreed that meeting weekly has been an improvement. President Elliott concurred and noted how valuable he has found the opportunity to meet with the committee weekly to be, allowing for discussions as issues emerge. Professor Call commented that one of the most valuable roles of the FEC, in his view, is serving as a sounding board for the president. The president and provost, who are also ex officio members of the Tenure and Promotion Committee (TPC), commented on how well that committee is working. They feel that the composition and charge are ideal. President Elliott said that he has been impressed with the quality and thoroughness of the deliberations surrounding tenure and reappointment cases. He and Provost Epstein said that they are supportive of the TPC’s recent decision to consider the standards and process for promotion to full professor, with the goal of ensuring greater clarity on both fronts. At the conclusion of the conversation, the FEC agreed to reflect further on the committee’s effectiveness, the ways in which the body is working in its inaugural year, its composition, and the committee’s charge, and to provide the faculty with a report at the final faculty meeting of the year.

The members then spent time offering feedback on some of the ideas that President Elliott had shared with them about possible ways in which Amherst might more deliberately claim and advance its work in educating students for the public interest. The president thanked the members for their helpful suggestions.

Under her remarks, Provost Epstein noted that, in response to an increasing number of requests over the years for funding to support publication expenses for faculty members’ scholarly work, including open-access publishing, the provost’s office has developed [some policies to guide the allocation of funds for this purpose](#). She noted that, while among its peers, Amherst continues to be one of the most generous when it comes to providing this funding, some limits must be set. The provost informed the committee of her plans to share the policies with the chairs of academic departments and programs at a meeting on March 3. Professor Hasan shared that, in his experience, many presses are passing along costs for services to authors and institutions that publication venues used to provide. This includes editorial support from development editors, for example. Provost Epstein said that the new policy does not cover the cost of development editors, for which she does not believe there are many requests; start-up funds can be used for this kind of

expense, she noted. Items not covered by the policy will be considered on a case-by-case basis, Provost Epstein said; she expressed an openness to revising the publication-funding policy, if this becomes necessary.

Turning to another topic, the provost informed the members that the Faculty Lecture Committee has selected Nicholas Holschuh, assistant professor of geology, as the 2022–2023 Lazerowitz Lecturer. A member of the Amherst faculty below the rank of full professor is selected annually for this appointment, the provost noted. The lecture is titled “Decision-Making in the Face of Melting Ice: How Do We Consider Earth’s ‘Unknown Unknowns?’” It will take place on April 26, from 4:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. The location will be announced soon.

Under “Questions from Committee Members,” after being asked by Professor Mattiacci about the status of the committee’s request for information about growth and distribution of lecturers and visitors over the past two decades, Provost Epstein said that she would check in with Jesse Barba, director of institutional research and registration services. Professor Call next informed the provost that the email that was sent about the COACHE (Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education) faculty job satisfaction survey was easy to miss in one’s email. Other members agreed and noted, as did Professor Call, that a reminder email was more prominent and prompted them to look for what they thought might have been a missing email. The provost said that the survey stays open for quite some time and that future reminder emails will be sent only to those who have not yet replied to the survey. Discussion then turned to proposals that had been submitted for Senior Sabbatical Fellowships, all of which the committee viewed as impressive, and a joy to read.

The members next considered the question of whether the Consultative Group for Tenure-Track Faculty should be decommissioned. Discussions about forming such a body began as early as 2015, the provost said; the last time the group had a full complement of members was in 2021. Provost Epstein explained that, given the ongoing conversations about faculty governance more broadly, and because two tenure-track faculty members now serve on the FEC, the consultative group was not constituted this year. The provost expressed the view that this new composition of the FEC gives tenure-track members a direct channel through which to raise issues of importance to them. In addition, on an annual basis, the president and provost meet with all tenure-track faculty (such a meeting has been scheduled for April 19 this spring), and the Committee of Six also met with all tenure-track faculty once a year. These meetings provide an opportunity for tenure-track faculty to ask questions and to learn about the committee’s work, in the latter case. Plans call for a meeting to be held with the FEC and all tenure-track faculty on March 27, the provost said. The members agreed that it would be informative to ask tenure-track colleagues for their views about this matter at this meeting. One idea would be not to constitute the consultative group, but to envision that tenure-track faculty might come together informally and charge the group to work on a particular issue on an ad-hoc basis.

Returning to the topic of the questionnaire that the members are developing to gather more information about the work of faculty committees and the experience of those who serve on them, the committee agreed to continue to finalize the questions and then have J. Barba create an electronic survey.

The members next discussed [the proposal from the Committee on Educational Policy \(CEP\) that faculty meetings be shifted from Tuesday evenings to Fridays between 3 p.m. and 5 p.m.](#) The members agreed that this proposal should be paired with a proposal to set the dates for faculty meetings for the year (a September convocation meeting; dates in October, November, December, February, March, and April; and a May commencement meeting) before the start of the new academic year. In this way, faculty members could plan their calendars around the meetings well ahead of time. In addition, Tuesday evenings could be used if an emergency situation arose, it was noted. Professor Mattiacci expressed some concern that, after reading the minutes of the CEP on this subject, there appeared to be some opposition in some quarters to holding faculty meetings on Friday afternoons. The members agreed that there is no perfect solution to this problem and expressed hope that pre-scheduling the meetings would allow for planning surrounding when labs are held and/or coverage of them on the

dates of meetings, childcare, and scheduling travel—issues that have been raised in the past when a daytime meeting slot has been considered. The members discussed how best to move forward with the faculty meeting time proposal. After considering different options, the members agreed to have a committee-of-the-whole conversation at an upcoming faculty meeting to learn more about the faculty's views on this subject. An electronic vote on the matter could then follow.

The meeting concluded with a conversation about the [CEP's proposal to modify the college's pass/fail policy](#). The proposal was prompted by the CEP's observation that there has been a significant increase in students requesting to know their current or expected grade in a course in the last few days of the semester, as well as in advisees submitting pass/fail requests electronically at this time. According to the CEP, this increase appears to have been made possible by the combination of the late deadline for declaring a course to be pass/fail, along with the fully online nature of obtaining permission. The CEP feels that some students are trying to manage their GPAs by deciding to take a pass in whichever one of their courses might have the lowest grade—even when that grade is an A- or B+. The CEP expressed concern about the extra burden that these requests place on faculty at a very busy time of the semester. The CEP also noted the side effects of instructors not knowing which of their students are taking the course pass/fail. Only the Office of the Registrar and the student's advisor(s) are made aware of this information. With all this in mind, the CEP is proposing the following: that a requirement be put in place that permission must be obtained both from the instructor of the course and from the student's advisor(s) and that it must be granted via a written signature on a physical, paper form. Once the pass/fail request is filed, the class dean would be informed, in addition to the advisor and instructor; that there be no change to the number of courses a student can take pass/fail (at most one per semester, and at most four in total over a student's eight semesters. (An early, redundant phrase in the catalog language about this limit would be modified, under the proposal. The CEP noted that a limit of four courses is still stated in a later paragraph that also allows correspondingly fewer pass/fail courses for transfer students. Thus, in spite of the one phrase being removed, all of these limits would remain exactly as they are in current practice.)

Professor Mattiacci expressed some concern that the proposal, if passed, would place additional burdens on advisors with a large number of advisees. Faculty with a large number of advisees are also those who teach larger classes. As a result, as students make requests for taking courses pass/fail, some faculty would see a "hit" on both fronts, she said, as they received an increased number of pass/fail requests in hard copy from students. She noted that there are two types of students who may be seeking a pass/fail option, and that the two groups should be distinguished from one another. There are those who are trying to enhance their GPAs and those who are struggling. She feels that the latter group should be supported by the class deans, including by making use of the pass/fail option, and that the former should be discouraged from making use of this option as a strategy to raise their GPAs. In Professor Mattiacci's view, the current proposal cannot, at least on paper, successfully distinguish between the two types of students, encouraging those who need the pass/fail to take it and discouraging those who do not need it from taking it.

Professor Call said that he has a different understanding of the proposal, which he feels has been designed to discourage students from using the pass/fail option frivolously. This would be done by making them jump through additional hoops (e.g., the paper form). The hope would be that, under the proposed system, faculty, including advisors, would receive fewer of these requests—not more. Struggling students who need an "escape valve" from courses at the last minute are typically already on the radar of a class dean, who would shepherd such students through the pass/fail process, he believes. Professor Call said that he has sympathy for the problem that the CEP is trying to address. Professor Call offered to reach out to Professor Benedetto, chair of the CEP, to convey the points that Professor Mattiacci raised and to ask for clarification.

Concluding the discussion, Professor Hasan said that he has been surprised that, currently, as early

as week ten of the semester, students come to him asking about their grade. Many are considering taking a course pass/fail if they are earning an A-. Provost Epstein suggested that the new Latin honors proposal—which relies on a median grade rather than a GPA-based calculation to determine the grade component of magna and summa honors—may help to reduce the number of students who are seeking to use the pass/fail option to maximize their GPAs. On a related note, the committee agreed that it would be helpful to facilitate a broader conversation about grade inflation at the college. Professor Hasan noted the need to structure such a discussion in a way that would not create additional pressures on tenure-track faculty.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Epstein
Provost and Dean of the Faculty